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The Bridge Gap In Mao's Revolt

By Fred L. Karpin

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IN THE LATE 1940s, Wellington Koo, the Chinese Ambassador to the United States, played in a small stake game with one of America's bridge experts. At the conclusion of the game, Mr. Koo had won $2.40 and the expert had won $2.30. Mr. Koo immediately asked the expert to sign the scorecard, indicating therein that Mr. Koo was the "big" winner. Since bridge players take a glowing pride in emerging victorious, especially in top-level competition, it is reasonable to assume that when he returned to China, the scorecard was framed and hung on the wall in Mr. Koo's trophy room; and that, in the ensuing years, all of Mr. Koo's guests, when inquiring about the details of his victory, were given a blow-by-blow description of his triumphant encounter.

But since the emergence of Red China as a new order, and Communist Party Chairman Mao Tse-tung's overriding insistence on bringing about a cultural revolution, not only have bridge accomplishments been cast into a state of disrepute, but bridge itself has come to be looked upon as a counter-revolutionary manifestation and a symbol of bourgeois decadence. In a Central Intelligence Agency release of a few weeks ago, the following revealed the reason for the recent purging of Teng Hsiao-p'ing, the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, and one of the most powerful men in that nation:

"It seems that Teng Hsiao-p'ing is a bridge devotee, and a game was such a ritual to him that he gave orders not to be disturbed while he was playing. He also had his bridge friends with him when he went out on trips on official business."

IN THE CIA's translation of this article, one is led right into the heart of Mr. Teng's original dereliction: back in 1961, he directed Wan Li, former member of the Communist Party Peking Municipal Committee to steal and use state building materials for the construction of a bridge club in Peking. Before long, Teng and his bridge-playing associates were playing there every Wednesday and Saturday night, and all day Sunday. Teng's fellow players always included top officials known throughout Red China: party commissars, cabinet ministers and prominent professors and intellectuals. There is no doubt that his games were always high class, at least in name, if not in technical proficiency. (Neither the CIA nor the article makes any mention of the degree of skill of the participants.)

According to his accusers, Teng was so enamored of bridge that whenever he left Peking on investigation and inspection missions "he would play his game even more madly." On one such investigation into one of China's rural provinces, Teng brought along three of China's leaders, together with a few lower-echelon aides. Special railroad coaches were provided for this official trip. As each village on his itinerary was arrived at, the aides were sent out to collect the necessary data. Teng and his triumvirate remained in the coach—playing bridge, of course. One of Teng's players on this trip was P'eng Chen who, at the time, was being prominently mentioned as the possible successor to Mao Tse-tung.

IN THE SUMMER of 1964, Teng went on another "inspection" trip to a Northeast province, accompanied by Yang Shang-K'un, Chief of Communist Party Patronage, and Po-I-Po, one of China's economic policy makers. En route, as reported in Tung Fang Hung, "Teng Hsaio-p'ing was seized by a sudden urge to play bridge. He called by long distance telephone Wu Han, famous historian and Deputy Mayor of Peking, to come to him and to bring two more good bridge players. Wu Han immediately left in 'top secret' with the requested two others in Yang Shang-K'un's special plane so that 'Emperor' Teng might have company at the bridge table. When they arrived, Yang said to Teng: 'You wanted three persons and I have brought them to you. Usually three people want a fourth, but you, as one, want three.'" Unusual, perhaps, but quite understandable: there has always been a dearth of good bridge players in Red China.

If Teng's dedication to duty was not what was expected of him, his dedication to bridge left no doubt. He is quoted as saying, "it is also necessary to expect one's utmost when playing bridge."

Teng's "official" bridge activities came to an abrupt conclusion in April, 1966, when Mao's cultural revolution thundered over Peking. One by one Teng's bridge companions were removed from the bridge table. The first to feel Mao's onslaught was Wu Han. Next in rapid succession, P'eng Chen and Yang suffered the fury of Mao's ire. Then the others in his coterie fell. The bridge club was finished—the old order had changethed.

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